

## **7 HELPING TRANSFER STUDENTS EARN BACHELOR'S DEGREES**

### ***Overview***

The state needs a barrier-free transfer system to help community college transfer students earn bachelor's degrees at four-year colleges and universities as efficiently as possible.

Associate degree "pathways" that prepare students for particular majors at four-year colleges and universities will help students graduate without completing more credits than they need to complete their bachelor's degrees. Currently, all associate degrees require students to complete exactly 90 quarter-based credits at a community college. Yet, students interested in some majors would be best prepared by completing more or less than 90 credits at a community college.

Existing statewide policy requires transfer students to complete 90 credits at a four-year college or university after they transfer with 90 credits from a two-year college. Elimination of this policy would allow students who complete associate degree pathways to graduate with exactly the credits they need to complete their bachelor's degrees.

In addition, creation of a statewide on-line student advising system like those developed in other states would help students learn which two-year college courses can be transferred as "equivalent" to four-year college courses and which two-year college courses meet different degree requirements at four-year colleges and universities.

### ***Analysis***

The 2004 legislature directed the Higher Education Coordinating Board to assume a leadership role in working with Washington's colleges and universities to ensure efficient and seamless transfer across the state. Developing a statewide system of course equivalency was a key assignment, along with developing transfer associate degrees for specific academic majors. Both of these efforts focus on better preparing students before they enter four-year colleges.

In addition to legislatively mandated efforts, the board supports eliminating a current requirement that requires all community college transfer students to complete 90 (quarter-based) credits at a four-year college and proposes replacing it with a policy that requires students to complete the number of credits at two-year and four-year colleges that best prepares them for their majors.

### ***Develop new associate degree pathways***

Current transfer policy reflects a longstanding agreement between colleges in the state to accept transfer students who complete approved associate degrees. This agreement, known as the “DTA” (Direct Transfer Agreement), ensures that students who complete specific associate degrees will, if accepted at a four-year college, be accepted with junior standing and with their general education – or “breadth” requirements – fulfilled. The DTA outlines specific breadth areas in humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, with the number of credits required for each and suggested disciplines that will best prepare a student for a bachelor’s degree.

This agreement has served thousands of students. Yet recently, academic leaders in the state have agreed that the DTA should be refined to give students more specific course planning for specific bachelor’s degrees. For example, students pursuing a bachelor’s degree in nursing need to know that they should complete specific chemistry courses as part of their natural science requirements. The HECB supports this direction as it will better prepare students for their majors at four-year colleges than the current DTA, which may be too broad for certain degree programs.

### ***Eliminate the current “90 credit” requirement for transfer students***

Current transfer policy requires community college students to complete a minimum of 90 quarter-credits at a four-year college or university in order to earn a bachelor’s degree. This policy fails to consider that students need to complete varying numbers of lower-division courses, depending on the majors they select. Some students may need to complete 90 credits in order to prepare for their majors at a four-year college while others may need to complete more or fewer than 90.

The board proposes replacing the current 90-credit requirement with a state policy that ties the number of transferable lower-division credits to major-specific transfer associate degrees. For example, a student who completes an associate of science transfer degree would complete more than 90 credits at the community college, while a student who completes another specialized transfer associate degree might complete fewer than 90 credits. The objective is to ensure that community college transfer students arrive at four-year colleges and universities prepared to enter their chosen majors.

### ***Develop a statewide on-line student advising system***

In Washington, every four-year college and university has different general education and “major” requirements and equivalent courses often have different titles and numbers. Although each college has developed a guide to illustrate course equivalency at its institution, no statewide system of course equivalencies exists.

The board's proposed statewide system would: (1) link all courses at public and private two-year and four-year colleges and universities to one another and (2) outline how each course maps toward fulfilling "major" requirements. Community college students would be able to automatically determine if specific courses met general education and major requirements at various four-year colleges and universities – before they registered for courses. According to the Education Commission of the States, 26 states have established statewide systems of course equivalency, some of which also outline recommended transfer programs (RTP's) for students.

Once the statewide system became fully operational, the state could explore additional features to improve the transfer process for Washington students and institutions. For example, adding electronic transcripts to the system would make it easier for transfer students to submit their courses for credit review and for four-year colleges and universities to evaluate and process transfer student applications.

## ***Implementation Plan***

### ***1. Develop associate degree pathways that focus on readiness for academic majors at four-year colleges and universities, as required by House Bill 2382.***

***By January 2005***, a report will be submitted to the legislature describing the progress of the work groups developing associate degree pathways.

***By June 2005***, new associate degree pathways will be developed for nursing, elementary education, and engineering. The HECB will collect an inventory of existing associate degree pathways that prepare students for bachelor's degrees and the number of transfer students earning bachelor's degrees, by major. Additional pathways will be identified, primarily based on the volume of transfer students transferring into particular majors.

***By December 2005, the HECB*** will revise its new academic degree program approval guidelines for bachelor's degrees to include a requirement that a corresponding associate degree pathway be identified to articulate with each newly proposed major.

***By June 2006***, additional associate degree pathways will be developed.

***By June 2007***, all four-year degrees that are in high demand by transfer students will be matched to corresponding associate degree pathways.

### ***Performance measure***

- Credits earned by transfer students in excess of those required for bachelor's degrees will decrease.

***Estimated costs***

The HECB and colleges and universities will absorb the costs, as they have done in past biennia.

***Examples of ongoing related work***

- Work groups have been established to develop associate degree pathways for nursing, elementary education, and engineering.
- The Joint Access Oversight Group, a two-year/four-year college work group, formally supports the effort to develop major-specific associate degrees and is assisting HECB staff in identifying the need for additional pathways.

***2. Revise existing Washington State transfer policy to delete the requirement that students transferring with associate degrees must complete an additional 90 quarter-based credits at a public four-year college or university in order to earn a bachelor's degree.***

In November 2004, the HECB notified Washington colleges and universities that it is deleting the 90-credit requirement from the statewide transfer policy.

***Performance measure***

- Credits earned by transfer students in excess of those required for bachelor's degrees will decrease.

***Estimated costs***

No costs have been determined.

***Example of ongoing related work***

The Joint Access Oversight Group supports the deletion of the current 90-credit requirement.

***3. Develop a statewide online student advising system to facilitate transfer and degree planning.***

***By January 2005, HECB staff and a work group*** formed through House Bill 2382 will publish a report regarding options and prospective operating and maintenance costs for a statewide online student advising system.

**By spring 2005, HECB staff** will solicit bids from vendors to build the online advising system, if funding is approved by the legislature and governor.

**By July 2005, HECB staff** will select a vendor.

**By January 2006, colleges and universities and HECB staff** will work with the vendor to ensure that course equivalency data is integrated into the statewide system, a student feedback tool is developed, and electronic transcripts are available.

**By January 2008,** the online student advising system will be fully operational, including a tool to facilitate faculty course equivalency decisions and, if applicable, links or interfaces to existing degree audit systems.

#### ***Performance measures***

- Credits earned by transfer students in excess of those required for their bachelor's degree.
- Student surveys measuring the system's effectiveness and ease of use.

#### ***Estimated costs***

Estimated costs, based on similar systems in other states, are \$1.1 million for development and first-year operation and \$550,000 annually thereafter. This is a rough estimate based on several assumptions that are being explored by the work group. The actual cost could vary significantly from these initial estimates.

#### ***Examples of ongoing related work***

- The HECB has convened a work group to research requirements and options for an online advising system, including costs, barriers to implementation, and interfaces to existing systems. The HECB is conducting a survey of other state transfer policies and related systems. Finally, the HECB has requested \$1.65 million for the advising system in its 2005-07 agency budget proposal.
- The two-year college system has developed a feasibility study for an online advising system specifically tailored to facilitate student transfer between two-year colleges and to advise students who seek associate degrees.
- The Joint Access Oversight Group, composed of academic leaders from two-year and four-year colleges, supports the need for a statewide online advising system.

